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THE ACADEMIES AND THE POPULAR ITALIAN STAGE IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

The influence of the academies in determining the character of the popular Italian drama in the Renaissance has been somewhat overlooked, because of the too sharp distinction usually drawn between the *commedia erudita* and the *commedia dell' arte*. It is convenient to draw such a line on the basis of the superficial difference in form between the two branches of the art, but in reality the partially improvised plays closely resemble the others in subject-matter and structure and even in some details of style. On both kinds the academies exerted a triple influence, contributing first to a general knowledge of classic models, with their excellent technique and their satiric tone; secondly to the enrichment of plots by romantic incidents from the vernacular *novelle*; and last, perhaps most important of all, rousing a wide interest in philosophic themes—platonic love and the opposition of values taken abstractly, such as love and duty, or love and friendship. We are perfectly familiar with the combination of these three elements on the English stage of that day, but are a little surprised to find that *commedie dell' arte*, far from being monotonously imitative and farcical, are quite as varied in character. Yet it is after all only natural that the actors and improvisers of these popular plays, who were usually actors and writers of *commedie sostenute* as well, and who were moreover often members of academies, should attempt to introduce their “cultured” interests into the little pieces which they affected to despise. It is equally natural that the fashion of forming literary clubs should spread from the higher ranks of society to the middle and lower, and that in the humbler circles plays should be made and given which imitate, though clumsily, the elegant productions of the nobility.

Sieneſe records have preſerved a particularly clear and interesting account of the ſpread of culture and philoſophy from the higher to the lower ſocial claſſes. In Siena, early in the ſixteenth cen-

tury,¹ "the times being troublous," a certain number of noble persons, men and women, agreed to form a "congregatione," "nelle quale, ponendo da parte tutti li spinosi, mordaci e i dannosi pensieri: e da se tutte scaciando le noiose, leggiere, vane e soverchie mondane cure, havessono solo e fermo intendimento di dare opera agl'esercizi delle più belle, delle più pulite e più ornate, e degne lettere, come Greche e Latine così volgari Toscane."² They chose as their motto: "Orare. Studere. Gaudere. Neminem laedere. Non temere. Credere. De mundo non curare." Among their exercises they gave a prominent place to "tanto appetitosa, tanto dilettevole ed ingegnosa Poesia," and did not hesitate to discuss "artificiosa Eloquentia," history, cosmography, and even astrology.³ They held disquisitions on Dante and Petrarch, on moral questions and on the natural sciences, all, says their panegyrist, "con legiadra prontezza e gratiosa acutezza."

Other "honest games" with which they whiled away long winter nights were debates on such subjects as: "Whether one loves by free choice or by fate," "Whether love without jealousy is possible," "Whether distance increases or diminishes love," "Whether the soldier or the scholar makes the better lover." Growing out of these debates, sometimes as statement of a point of view, sometimes as a summary of results, plays were written by the members, modeled partly on the classics but tinged by romance as well as satire, and usually crowded with philosophic implications.⁴ We incline to call these plays more farcical than they were meant to be, and to overlook their basal themes, because the values discussed seem to us merely artificial and abstract; but that these themes furnished a real "problem" element to their first audiences is perfectly evident from the academic debates.

Alessandro Piccolomini, a bishop of a great Siennese house, known among his fellows as "Lo Stordito," was the most successful playwright of the Intronati. His "no less honest than pleasing" comedy

¹ About 1530. Cf. G. Fabiani, *Memoria sopra l'origine ed istuzioni delle principali Accademie di Siena* (Venezia, 1757); also C. Mazzi, *La Congrega dei Rozzi* (Firenze, 1882). There were some sixty Academies in Siena in the sixteenth century.

² *La Descrittione del nuovo riaprimiento dell' Accademia Intronata* (Siena, 1603), 459.

³ *Ibid.*, 472.

⁴ Very many of the tales in the *Decameron* and in other contemporary collections turn on *dubii* of the kind just quoted. They were the basis of the "problem novel" as of the "problem drama" of the day.

of *Gl' Ingannati*,¹ his *Alessandro*² and his *Amor Costante*³ are all built on the theme of "Love against Fortune," and all express the triumph of Cupid. The last of the three, though a classical imitation in its observance of the unities and in the satiric exaggeration of its characters, is a lively working-out of a favorite romantic motif, the "love-chain" complication. Piccolomini might stand as the type of lettered playwright of the day, steeped in learning and determined to make his art at once the vehicle of satire and of the Renaissance theory of love. As truly as another academician-dramatist,⁴ he might be called "uomo affabile per natura e per arte dotto," who wrote plays "inserendovi dentro un gran parte della morale Filosofia, con tanti motti argutie che questo bastava . . . a dilettere ed insegnare." "Teaching delightfulness and delightful teaching!" So Sidney later echoed such Italian formulations of the aim and function of comedy.⁵

Lo Stordito was not the only star of the Intronati; he stands as the example of several merely because he more than the rest was marked out for popularity by the brilliance of his social position and the power of his old name.⁶ His plays and those of other members made the Academy famous far and wide, but in Siena the club was even more noted for its gorgeous public fêtes and processions. The people looked on at these and admired, until some of the bolder among the artisans went to work to form a society of their own.⁷ Under the modest name of the Rozzi, they met "solo per passare i dj festivj con quello minore otio che per noi si possi," their chief intent being "con qualche operatione virtuosa e gentile, pigliarci honestamente diletto e piacere."⁸ They admitted as members only those

¹ Probably the source of *Twelfth Night*. Cf. Furness' Variorum ed., introduction and appendix.

² Source of Chapman's *May Day*. Cf. Stiefel, "G. Chapman u. das italienische Drama," *Shaks. Jahrbuch*, XXXV (1899).

³ *L'Amor Costante, Commedia del Signor Stordito l'intronato, composta per la venuta del Imperatore in Siena, l'anno del XXXVI*—In Venetia, MDXL.

⁴ Angelo Beolco, known as Il Ruzzante, of Padua. Cf. printer's preface to *Commedie di M. A. Beolcho* (Vicenza, 1584).

⁵ Cf. J. E. Spingarn, *Literary Criticism in the Renaissance* (New York, 1908; 2d ed.), 66 ff.

⁶ A long list of plays by the Intronati is given in *Della Commedie degli Intronati di Siena* (Siena, 1611); cf. also *La Descriptione*, etc., 484 ff.

⁷ About October, 1531; Mazzi, *op. cit.*, I, 87.

⁸ Mazzi, *op. cit.*, I, 102-3.

who were "di qualche piacevole e galante virtù dotato, o di comporre o recitare o schermire o sonare o cantare o ballare o altre gentilezze simili," so that no one shall "occupi luogo in vano."¹ These so gallantly endowed persons had to be chosen from the artisan and merchant ranks, no one being taken in who "dia opera a altre lettere che a le volgari." Bottom and his mates live again in the records of this assembly, awkwardly written up in Sienese dialect, full of repetitions and of endless, involved sentences, but glowing with serious enthusiasm, piety, and "simpleness and duty." The members—among them a farrier, a painter, a paper-maker, an engraver—eagerly disclaim all political significance in their meetings and profess themselves zealous servants of the most holy Virgin and of the church.²

Besides enforcing mutual benefit regulations and attempting ethical legislation—as by the punishment of swearing—the Congrega devoted itself to "culture." At the meetings on Sundays after vesper service, athletic events alternated with readings from the great Italian authors or from compositions by the members themselves. The readings were followed by discussion of some theme suggested now by *dubii* from the sonnets or *novelle*, again by some practical ethical problem, as "quel fa più peccato, quello che bastemia per ira o per accidia o per superbia o per altro simile, o quello che bastemia per piacere, ridendo sens' alcuna chagione."³

Enough has been said to prove the influence of the learned academies on the organization and conduct of their imitators. It remains to show that the literary productions of the Rozzi differed from those of the Intronati only as their debates differed, that is in being more loosely and clumsily conceived and consequently very much less polished in form. The Rozzi, ignorant of all literature save that in the vulgar tongue, could not be expected to learn technique directly from Latin models; their plays are in fact loose-jointed, often little more than a series of *contrastì*, undivided into acts or scenes, and written for the most part in rough verse. Folk superstitions, folk magic, and satire of the peasant mingle with mythology and half-digested philosophical notions gained from the

¹ Mazzi, *op. cit.*, I, 364 ff. Quoted from the first *Capitoli dei Rozzi* (1531).

² Mazzi, *op. cit.*, I, 87 ff.

³ *Quistioni e Dubij dei Rozzi*, MS in the Comunale of Siena, 1532-49.

academic readings. There seems to be a perpetual struggle, similar to that we sometimes feel in the less artistic Elizabethans, a struggle on the playwright's part to subordinate his real interests, his first-hand knowledge of the life about him, to the more or less artificial themes in fashion with the upper classes. In the May plays of the Rozzi the clash between natural and conventional interests comes out in a number of ways; the speakers are nearly always nymphs and shepherds, with a few rustics and sometimes a god or two among them; coarse, realistic satire on the peasant is interspersed with high-flown *concetti* on platonic love, on the cruelty of fortune, and the like. In the masque-like *Trionfo d'Amore*, for instance,¹ Cupid is shown as the prisoner of a band of peasants who accuse him of all the ills which they have suffered from love, and who dispute as to what vengeance they shall take. The god's defense is simply: "Io non son di lascivia, ma amor vero." They do not understand him until Faith comes in, recognizes him, and carries him off to heaven, while Mercury appears in a car and sings of true love, consoling the peasants for their loss. The little play concludes with a madrigal sung by "philosophers come from the Elysian fields," Plato, Socrates, Solomon, and Diotima.

Such celestial argument was occasionally parodied by these common-sense poets, but even when seriously meant and taken it was not considered incompatible with the roughest *lazzi* and free fights on the stage. Sometimes a more carefully elaborated play combines crude touches of human nature with its academic elements. In *Il Romito Negromante* there is much satire at the expense of the reputed holy man who terrifies the country people with his "magic" and who thus succeeds in concealing from some his evil life. There are three acts to this *commedia pastorale*, three acts of confused merri-ment and tears. The huntress heroine, Lincia, "inimicissima degli amori," very nearly falls a victim first to the "romito disonesto," then to a peasant wandering through the wood in search of an ass; she escapes them only to meet Uranio, her shepherd lover, who is "non corisposto," of course, but who is favored by her father. In the second act, separated from the first only by too lively a peasant song, the nymph continues to flee from love in Uranio's shape;

¹ Mazzi, *op. cit.*, I, 174-75.

calling on Diana for help, she is turned into a tree, with the mournful effect of causing the youth immediately to kill himself. The peasant clown finds the body, attempts to rob it, and is well beaten therefor by Uranio's servant, who then calls in the aid of the magician. After some conjuring the two lovers come to life and Lincia to love; so in the third act they marry with rejoicings. The peasant furnishes the proper farcical conclusion by his attempt to imitate the sorcerer's charms, an effort which brings down on him several devils whose "strepiti e ridicolezze" end the comedy.¹

Most of these curiously hybrid pieces seem to have been acted, sung, and danced by the Rozzi themselves. The noble *academiae*, on the other hand, could afford to call in the services of professional Comici; the plays of Piccolomini, for example, were prominent in the repertory of the Gelosi, the troupe so famous at the courts of Mantua and Paris. This is one reason for the traces of academic influence on the improvised plays so frequently given by the Gelosi; another reason is that several of the actors were themselves members of learned societies and poetasters of some small repute. The leading lady, Isabella Andreini, was well known as "L'Accesa," her sobriquet in the Pavian academy of *Gl'Intenti*; her husband, Francesco, the Capitano Spavento of the cast, belonged to a Florentine academy.² Both utilized their privileges by absorbing a considerable amount of philosophy and classical learning which they took care to express elegantly in their plays and *concetti*.³

Scala's collection of the *scenari* used by the Gelosi⁴ contains hardly a play without at least a passing suggestion of some philosophic theme. In *Flavio Tradito* (Giornata V) the conflict centers around a question of honor; as in the *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and innumerable other Elizabethan plays, love and friendship are opposed. A pair of intimate friends, Flavio degli Alidori and Oratio Belmonte, love Isabella, daughter of Dr. Gratiano Forbicione; but Oratio loves

¹ Mazzi, *op. cit.*, I, 158 ff.

² L. Moland, *Molière et la Comédie italienne* (Paris, 1867), 50-51. Chiesa, *Teatro delle donne letterate* (1620), 199-200, says that Isabella Andreini was "una nuova Saffo," and had "non poca cognitione delle cose di filosofia."

³ *Bravure del Cap. Spavento*—In Venetia, MDCXV. *Lettere della Signora I. A., padovana ed academica intenta, nominata l'Accesa*—In Venetia, MDCVII. These *concetti*, which to us are such tedious reading, must have expressed live interests at the time of their publication, for they went into several editions.

⁴ *Il Teatro delle favole rappresentative . . . da Flaminio Scala* (Venetia, 1611).

treacherously, not regarding his friend's prior claim on the lady or her long-standing devotion to him. Flavio, however, is modest and not only believes Oratio's false representations that Isabella has changed her allegiance, but even promises to quit the field by marrying another girl, Flaminia. But before this happens he learns from a servant his friend's treachery, and a violent quarrel ensues between the rivals. Flavio, mirror of gallantry, cannot forget the laws of honor, and a little later, when Oratio is set upon by an enemy, Flavio rescues him. He is rewarded by Oratio's confession and request for pardon; the faithless friend excuses himself by accusing Love and Fortune as the instigators of his treason, a plea so readily accepted by everyone that he is not only forgiven but is made happy by the hand of Flaminia, Flavio's second choice, while Isabella is allowed to marry her true love.

The struggle of Love and Fortune is the theme of the highly romantic *Fortuna di Flavio* (Giornata II). The argument, which includes more than is presented on the stage, states that Flavio, in his youth captured by pirates and sold into slavery at Constantinople, escaped after a time with his master's son, whom he had persuaded to become a Christian and to whom he had promised his sister's hand; he also brought away in his flight his master's beautiful young daughter, disguised as a page and unknown even to her brother. In a sea-fight this damsel, fearing to be killed, leaps overboard; she is soon picked up by fishers, sold to a traveling charlatan and by him taken to Rome. Flavio, who had desperately jumped into the sea after his love, had of course been unable to find her; he had been washed ashore and rescued by a Spanish captain to whom he vows eternal gratitude and whom he accompanies to Rome as valet. The young Turk meanwhile had successfully conducted his galley to the mouth of the Tiber, had at once sought the Pope, been baptized and then set about discovering Flavio's family; without declaring his relation to Flavio, he woos his friend's sister, Flaminia, and has very nearly won her when the Spaniard declares himself a rival. The play opens at this point and is a lively intrigue based on the double interest of the several disguises and of the conflict in Flavio's mind between his promise of his sister to his Turkish friend and his gratitude to the captain who claims Flaminia as his

adequate reward. The happy ending is reached by the discovery that the mountebank's page is Flavio's lost sweetheart and by the appearance of another woman, formerly betrothed to the captain; thus Flaminia is left free to marry the young Turkish convert, whom she loves.

In these two plays, fairly typical of most of the others, the themes seem to be taken largely from romantic sources, the character-types to be strongly influenced by Latin models. The stage business is very farcical and must have been in amusing contrast to the serious *concetti* in which hero or heroine so often "esagera contra amore e fortuna."

There was an especially fine chance for doleful academic speeches in the only tragedy which Scala preserves in his collection. Although but one among so many, it is bloody enough to balance in gloom all the merriment of the forty-nine comedies and pastorals. The opposition in *La Forsennata Principessa* (Giornata XLI) is again between Love and Fortune, but here envious Fortune is triumphant: hence the tragedy. Briefly the plot is as follows: Tarfé, prince of Morocco, persuades Alvira, princess of Portugal, to elope with him; they are invited to the capital of Fez by its princess, Fatima. Tarfé no sooner sees this lady than he loves her, and forgetting his promises to Alvira, resolves to marry none but the lady of Fez; accordingly he abandons (*pianta*) his first love and flees before dawn with his tutor. But Alvira's brother has by this time followed the lovers, determined to see justice done his sister; he therefore, under a "blood-spotted moon," makes after Tarfé, kills him, and brings back his head to the deserted lady. She laments and weeps over this relic till she goes mad and jumps into the sea. More misfortunes follow. The father of the murdered prince now appears, kills the heir of Portugal, and is in turn killed by the mob. Meanwhile the king of Fez discovers that Fatima, far from having encouraged Tarfé's advances, has long loved a page, Pelindo; the outraged father has the youth strangled and sends his heart in a gold cup to Fatima; she drinks the poison she has poured over it and dies just as a messenger announces her father's suicide.¹ As in

¹ The reminiscences of Tancred and Gismunda here, and of Isabella in Alvira's madness, may be evidences of the influence of the *Decameron* or they may be simply traces of popular folk motifs. Camerini thinks Boccaccio is responsible for much of the roman-

Hamlet the final gloom is slightly relieved by a concluding scene in which the Moroccan general announces, amid public rejoicing, that he has captured Fez for his master.

All this tragedy of blood is enacted on the stage, with a number of comic scenes interspersed in the usual *commedia dell' arte* manner. Some of the mad scenes were evidently regarded as comic, for Alvira's *pazzie* consist partly in beating the servants and in going through grotesque antics on the seashore. Her ravings are not, like Ophelia's, scraps of popular songs, but the rags of her academic learning, as: "Io non mi maraviglia che l'acqua del fiume sia dolce e quella del mare salta, perche l'insalata v  sempre con suo olio . . . lo stretta di Gibilterra o vuoi di Zibilterra, che l'uno e l'altro nome li vien detto pure come piacque al suo fatal destino; quella poveretta dell' Orsa maggiore si calz  gli stivali d'Artofilace e and    pigliar ostreghe e cappe lunghe nel golfo di Laiazzo," etc. (Act II). But if the taste of the day regarded Alvira's madness as food for mirth, there is no doubt that the sub-plot, the Tancred-Gismunda complication, was seriously tragic. The stage directions call for a heroine of melodrama in Fatima, who is more than once signalized as "intrepida," who braves her father by praising to his face Pelindo's beauty, and who dies robed in black, "esagerando" against cruel Fortune and kissing her lover's poisoned heart.

It would take too long to quote all the *scenari* having plots from the *novelle*; hardly one is without a trace of some romantic motif as well as some philosophic theme. The classic influence is also double; in the first forty-one plays it is noticeable mainly in the Latin character-types and in the observance of dramatic technique; in the last nine pastorals, "opere miste," etc., it is more poetic and Ovidian. This concluding group of curious pieces deserves separate treatment; briefly it may be said to consist of spectacular plays not unlike those of the Rozzi in the mixture of folk and academic material, but far more ambitious in form.

The academic was of course not the only influence determining the character of these popular Italian plays, yet it must have been the most powerful element in their evolution. In shaping the rough

tic material in the Italian drama, but it may as truly be said that Boccaccio drew largely on folk sources for his tales. Cf. Camerini, *Nuovi profili letterari* (Milano, 1876), III, chap. i.

folk *contrasti* into more regular dramas, in adding to their monotonous flyting and horse-play the color of romantic incident, the interest of philosophic problems, and even the poetry of classical mythology, the academies probably did much more to popularize the ideas of the Renaissance than by the printed volumes that resulted from their discussions. For in Italy and in Paris as well as in England, the vast majority of the people were theater-goers, not readers, and the stage was more powerful than any books.

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